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Citation for published version:

Warwick, G 2018, 'Review of Valentin de Boulogne: Beyond Caravaggio (Metropolitan Museum and Louvre Museum, 2016-17)', *Renaissance quarterly*, pp. 1508-1509. <https://doi.org/10.1086/696414>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1086/696414](https://doi.org/10.1086/696414)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Renaissance quarterly

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Renaissance Quarterly
Review of Valentin de Boulogne: Beyond Caravaggio
--Manuscript Draft--

Manuscript Number:	
Full Title:	Review of Valentin de Boulogne: Beyond Caravaggio
Article Type:	Book Review
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Corresponding Author's Institution:	University of Edinburgh
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Author Comments:	

Valentin de Boulogne: Beyond Caravaggio.

Annick Lemoine and Keith Christiansen, with contributions by Patrizia Cavazzini, Jean-Pierre Cuzin, Gianni Papi. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, October 7 2016-January 16 2017 / Musée du Louvre, February 20-22 May 2017.

This ground-breaking study of the painter Valentin de Boulogne (1591-1632), and the acclaimed exhibition it accompanies, is the first major publication on this artist's oeuvre. The paucity of scholarship on Valentin belies the brilliance of his work. Christiansen and Lemoine have assembled nearly fifty of Valentin's sixty-odd known paintings in a display that demonstrates the exceptional calibre of his art. The exhibition coheres around an extraordinary group of paintings from the Louvre such as *The Innocence of Susannah* and *The Judgement of Solomon*, brought together with works ranging from the early Dresden *Cardsharps* to the late *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* from Toulouse, and the many musical companies of mid-career including the Metropolitan Museum's *Lute Player*. The range and depth captured in the exhibition and catalogue speaks to the powerful resonance of Caravaggio's influence, but also to Valentin's rare qualities of invention, composition, and painted execution. The lavishly-illustrated volume testifies to the dazzling range and pictorial acuity of his paintings across the categories of religious works and genre scenes that predominate in his oeuvre. The few examples of portraiture, as of Raffaello Menicucci, also suggest the depth of Valentin's capacities in this genre, notwithstanding the loss of other documented examples, as he rose to the position of court artist to Cardinal Francesco Barberini. As a fitting culmination to his career, the Barberini commissioned Valentin's sumptuous *Allegory of Italy* in which this painter of Caravaggesque 'realism' essayed the literary complexities of courtly allegory. This led directly to a commission for an altarpiece for St Peter's of the *Martyrdom of Saints Processus and Martinian*, alongside Poussin's *Martyrdom of St Erasmus*, as a triumph of French painting in Barberini Rome.

The timely significance of this book is manifest in the recent cluster of new exhibitions and publications under the broad title of 'beyond Caravaggio'. Concurrent with the Valentin exhibition, Letizia Treves' *Beyond Caravaggio* exhibition between the National Galleries in London, Dublin, and Edinburgh, also treats the question of Caravaggio's legacy in Rome in the decades immediately after his death, based on works in UK collections. Moreover, reworking the Caravaggesque corpus is also the subject of Michael Fried's *After Caravaggio* (2016) in which Valentin leads. These vanguard exhibitions and publications deepen and reframe our historical understanding of the complexities of Caravaggio's reception by Rome's artistic community in the aftermath of his soaring fame, flight, and

death. This is a question that much preoccupied an earlier generation of scholars – Alfred Moir, Richard Spear, Benedict Nicholson – in a quest to define the main figures of the ‘Caravaggesque’ in the second and third decades of the seventeenth century in Rome. Our reengagement with it now brings fresh questions about how to understand the range of artistic responses to Caravaggio’s startling realism. Valentin was a member of the shadowy Dutch and Flemish company of naturalist painters in Rome, the Bentvueghels or Schildersbent, which included Honthorst, van Baburen, and the *bamboccianti*, painters of genre in defiance of the academic conventions of history painting. Yet his work also appeared alongside Poussin at St Peter’s. In Valentin we have, as Roberto Longhi termed it, an ‘intelligent rupture’ within the Caravaggesque idiom. We recognise gestures, figures, and places from Caravaggio’s pictorial lexicon made new. Christiansen and Lemoine’s analysis highlights the prismatic nature of Valentin’s reception of Caravaggio through a broader Caravaggesque that includes Cecco del Caravaggio, the closest of Caravaggio’s heirs, Manfredi, above all Ribera but also, critically, Guido Reni, whose early Caravaggesque phase was inflected by the silvered grace of his later *maniera*. As acknowledged by Courbet and Manet’s interest in Valentin’s palette and paint handling alongside those of Caravaggio, the exhibition points to this artist’s place within the pantheon of French painting, as well as that of Rome. Might the Guido-like Metropolitan Museum’s young *Lute Player*, seen as a possible self-reference to Valentin’s name, and originally in the collection of Cardinal Mazarin, have equally interested the young Watteau?

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